

The Tree of life

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On Shavuot, when we read the passage of Matan Torah, the common practice is to stand during this reading just as Bnei Yisrael stood at Har Sinai, as stated in the pasuk: "Vayityatzvu betachtit hahar" – "And they stood at the foot of the mountain" (Exodus 19:17).

The Gemara (Shabbat 88a) comments on this pasuk:

"Rabbi Avdimi Bar Hama Bar Hassa said: this comes to teach that He placed the mountain upon them like a tub and said: if you accept the Torah – good, and if not, this will be your burial place."

This Gemara raises many difficulties. Firstly, the Torah explicitly says that the people of Israel accepted the Torah voluntarily by saying "na'aseh venishma" (Exodus 24: 7). If so, what need was there to force them to accept the Torah? In addition, isn't the whole essence of the Torah "deracheha darchei noam vekol netivoteha shalom" – "its ways are pleasant and peaceful," which seemingly contradicts threatening them with death? Furthermore, if the Torah was forced upon B'nei Yisrael, how is it binding? Indeed, the Gemara (ibid) says,

"מכאן מודעה רבה לאורייטא" – From here evolves a disclaimer to the Torah" and as Rashi explains:

"If you are brought to trial and asked, why you did not fulfill the Torah which you received, you can answer that the Torah was forced upon you against your will."

If that is the case, what was gained by forcing the Torah upon them?!

To answer the above questions, the Gemara can be understood differently (as explained in an article published in 1943 by Rav Yaakov Yitzchak Wohlgerlerner z"l, director of Talmud Torah Eitz Chaim, Toronto, Canada).

In the history of the world, many nations arose, were active for a period and then disappeared from the stage of history. The kingdoms of Persia, Rome and Greece all ruled the world and left their impression on it. Nevertheless, over time, they were conquered by other nations and their identity faded until they totally ceased to exist. One nation in the world, despite multiple attempts to destroy it and its culture, continues to exist unchanged. What is the secret of Jewish existence? What is the magic of its timelessness?

The answer is "Eitz chayim hi lamachazikim bah" – "It is a tree of life for those who hold fast to it" (Proverbs 3: 18), what keeps the Jewish people alive and assures Jewish identity, is the Torah.

Thanks to Torah, we maintain our uniqueness as Jews.

At the time of the exile, the Jews were scattered to all four corners of the earth. Wherever the Jews maintained their ancestral tradition, they continued to exist. However, wherever they abandoned the Torah path, they disappeared from the world.

According to this, our Gemara may be understood as follows: We asked how could Hashem have threatened us and forced us to accept the Torah?!

Now it can be explained that there was no coercion at all, the people of Israel were not obliged to accept the Torah. They voluntarily decided to do so. Hashem simply showed them that the Torah is the eternal secret of the Jewish people and that wherever Jews live, if they continue to observe the Torah and its commandments, they will have continuity. However, where Jews cut off their connection to the Torah, where they disconnect themselves from their life-line, then "that is where your burial will be." When a Jew ceases to act as a Jew, he is similar to all other nations. Just as all nations have a period of time when they appear on the stage of history and then disappear, so too, those Jews will disappear. Only when a Jew stays connected to the "eitz hachayim" is his existence guaranteed forever.

For this reason, Torah MiTzion's task of spreading the Torah throughout the Jewish world is of such importance. Through bringing Torah to every Jew around the world, we ensure that there should be no place where Judaism will be 'buried.' Just as there is a prohibition of "Lo ta'amod al dam re'echa" - "You shall not stand by your fellow's blood" (Leviticus 19:16), when a person is in physical danger we must not be passive but rather do all in our power to rescue him; so, too, with "lo ta'amod al dam

re'echa" in a spiritual sense. When a person is struggling spiritually, we must do everything in our power to save him.

When B'nei Yisrael said at Har Sinai "Na'aseh ve'nishma," they meant to say they wanted to stay connected to "eternal life" and so they wanted to keep the Torah. That is the meaning of "na'aseh." However, in order for the Torah to pass on to future generations as well, it is not sufficient to just keep and follow the Mitzvot. B'nei Yisrael also said "ve'nishma," to imply that they will try to comprehend and emotionally connect to the Mitzvot. By accepting upon ourselves to delve into Torah study and try to understand and identify with the Mitzvot, we guarantee that our children will want to follow in our path and stay connected to the "eitz hachayim."

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